

Spirit Revisiting

Production, Desire, and the Technics of Exchange

In a period where the chat room, the on-line dating platform, and the more atomized email correspondence and instant text messaging services have transformed the fiber optic cable into a conveyance mechanism for the distribution of desire and longing, it seems imperative that we consider the relationship that “production” and “desire” might have to our technological sense of self. What are the bases upon which we produce meaningful exchanges with others in and through technology? Can any consideration of the emotive potential of computers and forms of artificial intelligence also be interpreted as an inquiry into the nature of our own neural and biochemical mechanisms? Such questions lay the groundwork for a general looking forward and looking back at the last twenty-five years of Ars Electronica, which has served as a platform for artistic endeavors that have consistently made use of the properties and artifacts which animate, inhabit, and haunt our contemporary electro-mechanical lives. Charting the history of media and the aestheticization of new technological forms requires thinking through technology not only as the *production of desire* but also the ultimate expression of our *desire for production*; in order to get a better sense of ourselves and one another, we must engage with those aspirative impulses upon which our ambitions take shape and radiate across our networks and mechanized bodies.

Shortly before the first Ars Electronica festival in 1979, two radical assertions were made as to the ways in which postwar subjectivity was caught in a critical engagement with the technological apparatus. In 1972, Deleuze and Guattari offered a counter-thesis to the alienating effects of the capitalist super-structure and the fixed libidinal strictures of Freudian psychoanalysis in their text *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.¹ In an attempt to formulate alternative modes of characterizing subjectivity under the pressures of capitalism, they focus on the connectivity, exchanges, and flows that constitute the physiological, psychological, and social body. Rather than conceding to the end-game view of history—where the human drive for production is categorized as aberrant, excessive, and negatively destabilizing, they readily acknowledge that the social field is eminently invested with productive libidinal energy; and capitalism, which once had the potential for bringing about the complete deterritorialization of such production, has instead served to both unbind and rebind social codes, leading to the creation of dichotomous paranoid and schizophrenic states of desire.

Now fast-forward to the year 1976—to the first issue of the journal *October* in which Rosalind Krauss observes in no uncertain terms that the video camera afforded the subject a new means of self-identification and self-perception. As she writes in “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” not only is the subject, in terms of the formal ratios endemic to the standard electronic feedback configurations, virtually “centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis,” but is also caught in a recursive process

that allows the artist to immediately modify her behavior in order to achieve desired aesthetic and perceptual outcomes.² This suggestion that the medium of video might effectively serve as a “mirror” to the organic, subjective body presumes technology’s “narcissistic” nature, its intrinsic setting into motion of certain aesthetic, political and epistemological concerns that ultimately say more about humanity, its drives and preoccupations, than the apparatus itself.

Confronted with these two characterizations of technology and self in the postwar period—one specific, the other general, both addressing, and perhaps even literalizing, the concerns provoked by the themes of the symposium—what do we make of our desire *towards, in and through* machines, towards the very apparatuses that we produce and are extensions of us? Given that technology has become the ideal means of characterizing ourselves and our productive capacities—as seen in Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the term “desiring-machine” to describe aspects of an ideal subjectivity within a deterritorialized society—might we be able to consider the drive towards increased mechanization and digitization as a kind of “self-loving”?

It would seem that in the context of any discussion about technology and libidinal energy, it is also important to acknowledge this basic “technophilic” tendency in the works the Ars Electronica archive.

On the one hand, our discussion should focus on how the notion of desire works both implicitly and explicitly in the art of the postwar period—how desire might be coded within the gendering of the organic or mechanistic body, as seen in Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik’s collaborative performances for example, or how the desire for communication—the impulse to engage with others across metaphysical, technological, ideological, cultural, and geographical borders—may have been facilitated in innovative ways by a number of other artists. On the other hand, it will be equally productive, particularly in regard to the notion of “spirit,” to consider the relevance of highly interactive projects that have attempted to “mediate” between “intelligent” computerized effects and programs and the individuals who both engage with and produce them—experiments which explore the way persons and things establish contact with one another through “empathic” transference, or a kind of “tele-communication.”

The documents that stand out as being of interest in this endeavor are those which address the art/technology issue in both positive and negative terms. Can a productive future for media be envisioned in light of the overwhelmingly pessimistic views on the perils of technology posited by a range of philosophers and theorists since the nineteenth century? Has artistic practice necessarily become any more meaningful with the increased sophistication of electronic and mechanical apparatuses? Are we somehow empowered by the “late-capitalist” mechanisms of technological spectacles, or are we, as Debord suggests in 1967, simply losing our hold on authentic reality?



- 1 Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Felix, *Anti-Oedipus—Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1972. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane. New York, Viking Press, 1977
- 2 Krauss, Rosalind, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism.” *October*. 1: 52. 1976